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**DECOLONIZING THEORY,**

**PRACTICING SOLIDARITY**

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FEMINISM WITHOUT BORDERS

Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Decolonization, Anticapitalist Critique, and Feminist Commitments*

This volume is the product of almost two decades of engagement with feminist struggles. It is based on a deep belief in the power and significance of feminist thinking in struggles for economic and social justice. And it owes whatever clarity and insight the reader may find in these pages to a community of sisters and comrades in struggle from whom I have learned the meaning, joy, and necessity of political thinking. While many of the ideas I explore here are viewed through my own particular lenses, all the ideas belong collectively to the various feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist communities in which I have been privileged to be involved. In the end, I think and write in conversation with scholars, teachers, and activists involved in social justice struggles. My search for emancipatory knowledge over the years has made me realize that ideas are always communally wrought, not privately owned. All faults however, are mine, for seeking the kind of knowledge that emerges in these pages brings with it its own gaps, faults, opacities. These I accept in the hope that they too prove useful to the reader.

### *Feminist Commitments*

Why “feminism without borders?” First, because it recalls “doctors without borders,” an enterprise and project that embodies the urgency, as well as the internationalist commitment<sup>1</sup> that I see in the best feminist praxis. Second, because growing up as part of the postindependence generation in India meant an acute awareness of the borders, boundaries, and traces of British colonialism on the one hand, and of the unbounded promise of decolonization on the other. It also meant living the contradiction of the promise of nationalism and its various limits and failures in postcolonial India. Borders suggest both containment and safety, and women often pay a price for daring

to claim the integrity, security, and safety of our bodies and our living spaces. I choose "feminism without borders," then, to stress that our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them.

Feminism without borders is not the same as "border-less" feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real—and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division. I want to speak of feminism without silences and exclusions in order to draw attention to the tension between the simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders in our everyday lives.

In my own life, borders have come in many guises, and I live with them inside as well as across racialized women's communities. I grew up in Mumbai (Bombay), where the visible demarcations between India and Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim, rich and poor, British and Indian, women and men, Dalit and Brahmin were a fact of everyday life. This was the same Mumbai where I learned multiple languages and negotiated multiple cultures in the company of friends and neighbors, a Mumbai where I went to church services—not just Hindu temples—and where I learned about the religious practices of Muslims and Parsees. In the last two decades, my life in the United States has exposed some new fault-lines—those of race and sexuality in particular. Urbana, Illinois, Clinton, New York, and Ithaca, New York, have been my home places in the United States, and in all three sites I have learned to read and live in relation to the racial, class, sexual, and national scripts embedded in North American culture. The presence of borders in my life has been both exclusionary and enabling, and I strive to envision a critically transnational (internationalist) feminist praxis moving through these borders.

I see myself as an antiracist feminist. Why does antiracist feminism<sup>2</sup> matter in struggles for economic and social justice in the early twenty-first century? The last century was clearly the century of the maturing of feminist ideas, sensibilities, and movements. The twentieth century was also the century of the decolonization of the Third World/South,<sup>3</sup> the rise and splintering of the communist Second World, the triumphal rise and recolonization of almost the entire globe by capitalism, and of the consolidation of ethnic, national-

ist, and religious fundamentalist movements and nation-states. Thus, while feminist ideas and movements may have grown and matured, the backlash and challenges to feminism have also grown exponentially.

So in this political/economic context, what would an economically and socially just feminist politics look like? It would require a clear understanding that being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our economic and social marginality and/or privilege. It would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women. The interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism are an integral part of our social fabric, wherever in the world we happen to be. We need to be aware that these ideologies, in conjunction with the regressive politics of ethnic nationalism and capitalist consumerism, are differentially constitutive of all of our lives in the early twenty-first century. Besides recognizing all this and formulating a clear analysis and critique of the behaviors, attitudes, institutions, and relational politics that these interwoven systems entail, a just and inclusive feminist politics for the present needs to also have a vision for transformation and strategies for realizing this vision.

Hence decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and solidarity.<sup>4</sup> I firmly believe an antiracist feminist framework, anchored in decolonization and committed to an anticapitalist critique, is necessary at this time. In the chapters that follow I develop antiracist feminist frameworks or ways of seeing, interpreting, and making connections between the many levels of social reality we experience. I outline a notion of feminist solidarity, as opposed to vague assumptions of sisterhood or images of complete identification with the other. For me, such solidarity is a political as well as ethical goal.

Here is a bare-bones description of my own feminist vision: this is a vision of the world that is pro-sex and -woman, a world where women and men are free to live creative lives, in security and with bodily health and integrity, where they are free to choose whom they love, and whom they set up house with, and whether they want to have or not have children; a world where pleasure rather than just duty and drudgery determine our choices, where free and imaginative exploration of the mind is a fundamental right; a vision in which economic stability, ecological sustainability, racial equality, and the redistribution of wealth form the material basis of people's well-being. Finally, my vision is

one in which democratic and socialist practices and institutions provide the conditions for public participation and decision making for people regardless of economic and social location. In strategic terms, this vision entails putting in place antiracist feminist and democratic principles of participation and relationality, and it means working on many fronts, in many different kinds of collectivities in order to organize against repressive systems of rule. It also means being attentive to small as well as large struggles and processes that lead to radical change—not just working (or waiting) for a revolution. Thus everyday feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist practices are as important as larger, organized political movements.

While I have no formulas or easy answers, I am a firm believer in the politics of solidarity, which I discuss in some depth in the chapters that follow. But no vision stands alone, and mine owes much to the work of numerous feminist scholars and activists around the world. A brief and very partial genealogy of feminist theoretical frames that have influenced my own thinking illustrates this debt to a vital and challenging transnational feminist community.

In the 1970s and 1980s, socialist feminist thinkers including Michelle Barrett, Mary McIntosh, Zillah Eisenstein, Dorothy Smith, and Maria Mies pointed out the theoretical limitations of an implicitly masculinist Marxism. These scholars clarified the intricate relationship between production and reproduction, the place of the “family” and the “household” in the economic and social relations of capitalist society, and the relation of capitalism to patriarchy (Zillah Eisenstein coined the term “capitalist patriarchy”).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, scholars such as Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis theorized the racialization of gender and class in their early work entitled *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives*. And in the United Kingdom, Kumkum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson critiqued the theoretical limitations of such socialist feminist concepts as “family” and “household” on Eurocentric grounds. Similarly, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar wrote eloquently about the race blindness of “imperial feminism”—socialist, radical, and liberal. In the United States, lesbians of color such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cherrie Moraga, Merle Woo, Paula Gunn Allen, and Gloria Anzaldúa faced head-on the profound racism and heterosexism of the women’s movement, and of U.S. radical and liberal feminist theory of the second wave of feminism.<sup>6</sup> Arguments about the race, color, class, and sexual dimensions of gender in the building of feminist analysis and community took center stage in

the work of these U.S. feminists of color. The Barnard Conference in the early 1980s inaugurated the so-called sex wars, which brought the contradictions of sex, sexuality, erotica, pornography, and such marginalized sexual practices as sadomasochism to the forefront of feminist debate.<sup>7</sup>

The 1980s also saw the rise of standpoint epistemology, especially through the work of Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, and Sandra Harding. This work defined the link between social location, women’s experiences, and their epistemic perspectives. And then there were the feminists from Third World/South nations who had a profound influence on my own understanding of the relationship of feminism and nationalism, and of the centrality of struggles for decolonization in feminist thought. Kumari Jayawardena, Nawal el Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Isabel Letelier, and Achola Pala all theorized the specific place of Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African women in national struggles for liberation, and in the economic development and democratization of previously colonized countries.<sup>8</sup>

More contemporaneously, the work of feminist theorists Ella Shohat, Angela Davis, Jacqui Alexander, Linda Alcoff, Lisa Lowe, Avtar Brah, bell hooks, Zillah Eisenstein, Himani Bannerji, Patricia Bell Scott, Vandana Shiva, Kumkum Sangari, Ruth Frankenberg, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Kimberle Crenshaw, Elizabeth Minnich, Leslie Roman, Lata Mani, Uma Narayan, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Leila Ahmed, among many others, has charted new ground in the theorization of feminism and racism, immigration, Eurocentrism, critical white studies, heterosexism, and imperialism.<sup>9</sup> While there are many scholars and activists who remain unnamed in this brief genealogy, I offer this partial history of ideas to anchor, in part, my own feminist thinking and to clarify the deeply collective nature of feminist thought as I see it. Let me now turn briefly to the limits and pitfalls of feminist practice as I see them in my own context and then move on to a discussion of decolonization and feminist anticapitalist critique. Finally, a road map introduces the reader to the organization of the book.

Feminist practice as I understand it operates at a number of levels: at the level of daily life through the everyday acts that constitute our identities and relational communities; at the level of collective action in groups, networks, and movements constituted around feminist visions of social transformation; and at the levels of theory, pedagogy, and textual creativity in the scholarly and writing practices of feminists engaged in the production of knowledge. While

the last few decades have produced a theoretically complex feminist practice (I refer to examples of these throughout the book), they have also spawned some problematic ideologies and practices under the label "feminist."

In my own context I would identify three particular problematic directions within U.S.-based feminisms. First, the increasing, predominantly class-based gap between a vital women's movement and feminist theorizing in the U.S. academy has led in part to a kind of careerist academic feminism whereby the boundaries of the academy stand in for the entire world and feminism becomes a way to advance academic careers rather than a call for fundamental and collective social and economic transformation. This gap between an individualized and narrowly professional understanding of feminism and a collective, theoretical feminist vision that focuses on the radical transformation of the everyday lives of women and men is one I actively work to address. Second, the increasing corporatization of U.S. culture and naturalization of capitalist values has had its own profound influence in engendering a neoliberal, consumerist (protocapitalist) feminism concerned with "women's advancement" up the corporate and nation-state ladder. This is a feminism that focuses on financial "equality" between men and women and is grounded in the capitalist values of profit, competition, and accumulation.<sup>10</sup> A protocapitalist or "free-market" feminism is symptomatic of the "Americanization" of definitions of feminism—the unstated assumption that U.S. corporate culture is the norm and ideal that feminists around the world strive for. Another characteristic of protocapitalist feminism is its unstated and profoundly individualist character. Finally, the critique of essentialist identity politics and the hegemony of postmodernist skepticism about identity has led to a narrowing of feminist politics and theory whereby either exclusionary and self-serving understandings of identity rule the day or identity (racial, class, sexual, national, etc.) is seen as unstable and thus merely "strategic." Thus, identity is seen as either naive or irrelevant, rather than as a source of knowledge and a basis for progressive mobilization.<sup>11</sup> Colonizing, U.S.- and Eurocentric privileged feminisms, then, constitute some of the limits of feminist thinking that I believe need to be addressed at this time. And some of these problems, in conjunction with the feminist possibilities and vision discussed earlier, form the immediate backdrop to my own thinking in the chapters that follow.

## On Solidarity, Decolonization, and Anticapitalist Critique

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. Jodi Dean (1996) develops a notion of "reflective solidarity" that I find particularly useful. She argues that reflective solidarity is crafted by an interaction involving three persons: "I ask you to stand by me over and against a third" (3). This involves thematizing the third voice "to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal," rather than as an "us vs. them" notion. Dean's notion of a communicative, in-process understanding of the "we" is useful, given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences. It is the praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important to my thinking—and the reason I prefer to focus attention on solidarity rather than on the concept of "sisterhood." Thus, decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and the politics of solidarity are the central themes of this book. Each concept foregrounds my own commitments and emerges as a necessary component of an antiracist and internationalist feminism—without borders. In particular, I believe feminist solidarity as defined here constitutes the most principled way to cross borders—to decolonize knowledge and practice anticapitalist critique.

In what is one of the classic texts on colonization, Franz Fanon (1963) argues that the success of decolonization lies in a "whole social structure being changed from the bottom up"; that this change is "willed, called for, demanded" by the colonized; that it is a historical process that can only be understood in the context of the "movements which give it historical form and content"; that it is marked by violence and never "takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally"; and finally that "decolonization is the veritable creation of new men." In other words, decolonization involves profound transformations of self, community, and governance structures. It can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination. It is a historical and collective process, and as such can only be understood within

these contexts. The end result of decolonization is not only the creation of new kinds of self-governance but also “the creation of new men” (and women). While Fanon’s theorization is elaborated through masculine metaphors (and his formulation of resistance is also profoundly gendered),<sup>12</sup> the framework of decolonization that Fanon elaborates is useful in formulating a feminist decolonizing project. If processes of sexism, heterosexism, and misogyny are central to the social fabric of the world we live in; if indeed these processes are interwoven with racial, national, and capitalist domination and exploitation such that the lives of women and men, girls and boys, are profoundly affected, then decolonization at all the levels (as described by Fanon) becomes fundamental to a radical feminist transformative project. Decolonization has always been central to the project of Third World feminist theorizing—and much of my own work has been inspired by these particular feminist genealogies.

Jacqui Alexander and I have written about the significance of decolonization to feminist anticolonial, anticapitalist struggle<sup>13</sup> and I want to draw on this analysis here. At that time we defined decolonization as central to the practice of democracy, and to the reenvisioning of democracy outside free-market, procedural conceptions of individual agency and state governance. We discussed the centrality of self-reflexive collective practice in the transformation of the self, reconceptualizations of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization.<sup>14</sup> Finally, we argued that history, memory, emotion, and affectional ties are significant cognitive elements of the construction of critical, self-reflective, feminist selves and that in the crafting of oppositional selves and identities, “decolonization coupled with emancipatory collective practice leads to a rethinking of patriarchal, heterosexual, colonial, racial, and capitalist legacies in the project of feminism and, thus, toward envisioning democracy and democratic collective practice such that issues of sexual politics in governance are fundamental to thinking through questions of resistance anchored in the daily lives of women, that these issues are an integral aspect of the epistemology of anticolonial feminist struggle” (xxxviii). The chapters that follow draw on these particular formulations of decolonization in the context of feminist struggle. A formulation of decolonization in which autonomy and self-determination are central to the process of liberation and can only be achieved through “self-reflexive collective practice.”

I use the term “anticapitalist critique” for two reasons. First, to draw at-

tention to the specificities of global capitalism and to name and demystify its effects in everyday life—that is, to draw attention to the anticapitalist practices we have to actively engage in within feminist communities. And second, to suggest that capitalism is seriously incompatible with feminist visions of social and economic justice. In many ways, an anticapitalist feminist critique has much in common with earlier formulations of socialist feminism. But this is a racialized socialist feminism, attentive to the specific operations and discourses of contemporary global capitalism: a socialist feminist critique, attentive to nation and sexuality—and to the globalized economic, ideological, and cultural interweaving of masculinities, femininities, and heterosexualities in capital’s search for profit, accumulation, and domination.

To specify further, an anticapitalist critique fundamentally entails a critique of the operation, discourse, and values of capitalism and of their naturalization through neoliberal ideology and corporate culture. This means demystifying discourses of consumerism, ownership, profit, and privatization—of the collapse of notions of public and private good, and the refashioning of social into consumer identities within corporate culture. It entails an anti-imperialist understanding of feminist praxis, and a critique of the way global capitalism facilitates U.S.- and Eurocentrism as well as nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment. This analysis involves decolonizing and actively combating the naturalization of corporate citizenship such that democratic, socialist, antiracist feminist values of justice, participation, redistribution of wealth and resources, commitment to individual and collective human rights and to public welfare and services, and accountability to and responsibility for the collective (as opposed to merely personal) good become the mainstay of transformed local, national, and transnational cultures. In this frame, difference and plurality emerge as genuinely complex and often contradictory, rather than as commodified variations on Eurocentric themes. Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 develop these ideas in some detail.

### *Feminism without Borders: A Road Map*

The book is organized around two interlocking themes, which form the first two parts of the book: decolonizing feminism and demystifying capitalism. The questions of experience, identity, and solidarity run centrally through both parts. While they are also more or less chronologically organized in terms of my own engagement with the vicissitudes of feminist struggle, together



the two parts take up some of the most urgent questions facing a transnational feminist praxis today. A third and final part, "Reorienting Feminism," picks up the issues explored in chapter 1, "Under Western Eyes," and reorients them in the context of feminist scholarship, pedagogy, and politics in the early years of this century. My intellectual preoccupations in the 1980s focused on the way the "West" colonizes gender, in particular, its colored, racial, and class dimensions. Now, almost two decades later, I am concerned with the way that gender matters in the racial, class, and national formations of globalization. The three parts of this book, "Decolonizing Feminism," "Demystifying Capitalism," and "Reorienting Feminism," mark this movement in my own thinking. The chapters themselves encourage both a personal and a larger, collective genealogy of feminist practice, which moves through the enforced boundaries of race, color, nation, and class. I write in conversation with and for progressive, left, feminist, and anti-imperialist scholars, intellectuals, and activists around the world. A few intellectual themes emerge in these chapters:

- the politics of difference and the challenge of solidarity
- the demystification of the workings of power and strategies of resistance in scholarship, pedagogy, grassroots movements, and academic institutions
- the decolonizing and politicizing of knowledge by rethinking self and community through the practice of emancipatory education
- the building of an ethics of crossing cultural, sexual, national, class, and racial borders
- and finally, theorizing and practicing anticapitalist and democratic critique in education, and through collective struggle.

#### PART I: DECOLONIZING FEMINISM

The practice of feminism across national and cultural divisions is the primary focus of this part of the book. The five chapters that comprise it together stage various dialogues between "Western," First World/North and Third World/South feminisms. These chapters offer a critique of Eurocentrism and of Western developmentalist discourses of modernity, especially through the lens of the racial, sexual, and class-based assumptions of Western feminist scholarship. Simultaneously, these chapters foreground genealogies of Third World/South feminisms, exploring the histories, experiences, and politics of identity embedded in nonhegemonic feminist practice. Chapter 1, "Under

Western Eyes," engages Western feminist discourses on women in the Third World, calling for a radical decolonization of feminist cross-cultural scholarship. This chapter appears in its original 1986 version and is the occasion for the reflections in part 3, "Reorienting Feminism." Chapter 2, "Cartographies of Struggle," was originally written as a companion piece to chapter 1, and provides an account of the emergence and consolidation of Third World women's feminist politics in the late twentieth century. It examines issues of definition and context in the emergence of Third World feminisms, and explores the notion of "common interests" and a "common context of struggle" in crafting feminist solidarities. Chapter 2 has an organic relation to chapter 1 in that it is the critique of Eurocentrism within feminist theory that allows me to move toward the specification of Third World feminism and toward a vision of common contexts of struggle. Chapter 3, "What's Home Got To Do with It?," written with Biddy Martin, offers a close reading of Minnie Bruce Pratt's autobiographical narrative "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart" (Pratt 1984a). It poses questions dealing with the configuration of home, identity, and community in the construction of whiteness and heterosexuality. Questions of racialized and sexualized difference and the ethics and politics of crossing borders are refracted through the lens of experience, history, and struggle for community. Chapter 4, "Sisterhood, Coalition, and the Politics of Location," continues the discussion of experience, identity, and difference, this time staging a dialogue between texts written by Robin Morgan and Bernice Johnson Reagon, which address directly the question of cross-cultural, cross-national differences among women and the politics of sisterhood and solidarity. A third, more recent text on the challenge of local feminisms by Amrita Basu (1995) serves as a counterpoint to these earlier discussions of "global sisterhood." Finally, in chapter 5, "Genealogies of Community, Home, and Nation" I return to the issues of home, identity, and community, but this time through a more individual, personal lens. Here I craft my own personal/political genealogy through feminism and the borders of nation-states, class, race, and religion. Location, community, and collective struggle all emerge as fundamental in this analysis. Thus decolonizing feminism involves a careful critique of the ethics and politics of Eurocentrism, and a corresponding analysis of the difficulties and joys of crossing cultural, national, racial, and class boundaries in the search for feminist communities anchored in justice and equality.



## PART 2: DEMYSTIFYING CAPITALISM

Part 2 revolves around the analysis of global capitalist relations of rule and the ideal of transnational feminist solidarity. Chapter 6, "Women Workers and the Politics of Solidarity," is anchored in the conceptual framework of a common context of struggle, and offers a comparative feminist analysis of women workers at different ends of the global assembly line. It develops a vision of anticapitalist feminist solidarity based on the theorization of the common interests, historical location, and social identity of women workers under global capitalism. Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the U.S. academy and focus on the issues of multiculturalism, globalization, and corporatization. Chapter 7, "Privatized Citizenship, Corporate Academies, and Feminist Projects," focuses on the landscape of the U.S. academy and analyzes the commodification of knowledge and the complex racial and gendered effects of global economic and political restructuring on the North American academy. It engages questions of experience, power, knowledge, and democracy and develops a feminist anticapitalist critique of the academy and the ethics and politics of knowledge production. Finally, chapter 8, "Race, Multiculturalism, and Pedagogies of Dissent," examines the challenges posed to U.S. higher education by a "race industry" anchored in a corporate model of conflict management rather than in the values of social justice. It analyzes the genealogies of interdisciplinary programs such as women's studies and race and ethnic studies and explores pedagogies of decolonization and dissent as a counter to multiculturalist discourses and practices of accommodation. The chapter delves deeper into the politics of knowledge, curricular and pedagogical practices, and their effects on marginalized communities in the academy.

## PART 3: REORIENTING FEMINISM

Part 3 consists of one chapter, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited," which reexamines the ideas in chapter 1, "Under Western Eyes," to deepen, widen, and move through a different, albeit related, landscape of transnational feminist struggle. Here I recast the cross-cultural feminist project I explored almost twenty years ago, by reengaging with its concerns. While I focused then on the Eurocentric assumptions of Western feminist practice and its too easy claiming of sisterhood across national, cultural, and racial differences, my concerns now focus on antiracist feminist engagement with the multiple effects of globalization and on building solidarities. I suggest that we reorient transnational feminist practice toward anticapitalist struggles, by

examining feminist pedagogies and scholarship on globalization and by exploring the implications of the absence of racialized gender and feminist politics in antiglobalization movements. This section weaves together numerous strands that run through the book: the politics of difference and solidarity, the crossing of borders, the relation of feminist knowledges and scholarship to organizing and social movements, crafting a transnational feminist anticapitalist critique, decolonizing knowledge, and theorizing agency, identity, and resistance in the context of feminist solidarity. Rather than providing a conclusion, "Reorienting Feminism" opens outward to new possibilities and maps new beginnings.

The book has a spiral structure, since chapters move in and out of similar queries, but at many different levels. I look again at genealogies and commitments of feminism defined in the closing decades of the last century. And I return time and again to the ideas, politics, and genealogies of feminism that have inspired me over the years. Whereas my concerns remain the same, my vision, my experiences, and my communities, have in part changed because of shifts in my own location, and in the post-1989 global political and economic landscape. It is this shifting and changing that I wish to share in the hope that the questions that have preoccupied me (and many other feminist comrades in struggle) over the last two decades emerge clearly and powerfully in these pages—and that my journeys through various feminist narratives, projects, and agendas prove useful to others engaged in similar struggles for social justice.<sup>15</sup>

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Under Western Eyes: Feminist*

### *Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*

Any discussion of the intellectual and political construction of "Third World feminisms" must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of hegemonic "Western" feminisms and the formulation of autonomous feminist concerns and strategies that are geographically, historically, and culturally grounded. The first project is one of deconstructing and dismantling; the second is one of building and constructing. While these projects appear to be contradictory, the one working negatively and the other positively, unless these two tasks are addressed simultaneously, Third World feminisms run the risk of marginalization or ghettoization from both mainstream (right and left) and Western feminist discourses.

It is to the first project that I address myself here. What I wish to analyze is specifically the production of the "Third World woman" as a singular, monolithic subject in some (Western) feminist texts. The definition of colonization I wish to invoke here is a predominantly discursive one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women in the Third World through the use of particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject that take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the United States and Western Europe. If one of the tasks of formulating and understanding the locus of Third World feminisms is delineating the way in which they resist and work against what I am referring to as "Western feminist discourse," then an analysis of the discursive construction of Third World women in Western feminism is an important first step.

Clearly, neither Western feminist discourse nor Western feminist political practice is singular or homogeneous in its goals, interests, or analyses. However, it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit

assumption of "the West" (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis. My reference to "Western feminism" is by no means intended to imply that it is a monolith. Rather, I am attempting to draw attention to the similar effects of various textual strategies used by writers that codify others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western. It is in this sense that I use the term "Western feminist." Similar arguments can be made about middle-class, urban African or Asian scholars who write about their rural or working-class sisters and assume their own middle-class cultures at the norm and codify working class histories and cultures as other. Thus, while this chapter focuses specifically on what I refer to as "Western feminist" discourse on women in the Third World, the critiques I offer also pertain to Third World scholars who write about their own cultures and employ identical strategies.

It ought to be of some political significance that the term "colonization" has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general. From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxisms (see, in particular, Amin 1977, Baran 1962, and Gunder-Frank 1967) to its use by feminist women of color in the United States to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements (see especially Joseph and Lewis 1981, Moraga 1984, Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, and Smith 1983), colonization has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the Third World.<sup>1</sup> However sophisticated or problematical its use as an explanatory construct, colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.

My concern about such writings derives from my own implication and investment in contemporary debates in feminist theory and the urgent political necessity of forming strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries. The analytic principles discussed below serve to distort Western feminist political practices and limit the possibility of coalitions among (usually white) Western feminists, working-class feminists, and feminists of color around the world. These limitations are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organize. The necessary and integral connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political practice and organizing de-

termines the significance and status of Western feminist writings on women in the Third World, for feminist scholarship, like most other kinds of scholarship, is not the mere production of knowledge about a certain subject. It is a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological. It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses (e.g., traditional anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism); it is a political praxis that counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old "legitimate" and "scientific" bodies of knowledge. Thus, feminist scholarly practices (reading, writing, critiquing, etc.) are inscribed in relations of power—relations that they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship.

The relationship between "Woman" (a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses—scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) and "women" (real, material subjects of their collective histories) is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity or a relation of correspondence or simple implication.<sup>2</sup> It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures. I would like to suggest that the feminist writings I analyze here discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "Third World woman"—an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the Third World in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the Third World. An analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the "Third World difference"—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries. And it is in the production of this Third World difference that Western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities that characterize the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive

homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named.

In the context of the West's hegemonic position today—the context of what Anouar Abdel-Malek (1981) calls a struggle for “control over the orientation, regulation and decision of the process of world development on the basis of the advanced sector's monopoly of scientific knowledge and ideal creativity” (145)—Western feminist scholarship on the Third World must be seen and examined precisely in terms of its inscription in these particular relations of power and struggle. There is, it should be evident, no universal patriarchal framework that this scholarship attempts to counter and resist—unless one posits an international male conspiracy or a monolithic, ahistorical power structure. There is, however, a particular world balance of power within which any analysis of culture, ideology, and socioeconomic conditions necessarily has to be situated. Abdel-Malek is useful here, again, in reminding us about the inherence of politics in the discourses of “culture”:

Contemporary imperialism is, in a real sense, a hegemonic imperialism, exercising to a maximum degree a rationalized violence taken to a higher level than ever before—through fire and sword, but also through the attempt to control hearts and minds. For its content is defined by the combined action of the military-industrial complex and the hegemonic cultural centers of the West, all of them founded on the advanced levels of development attained by monopoly and finance capital, and supported by the benefits of both the scientific and technological revolution and the second industrial revolution itself. (145–46)

Western feminist scholarship cannot avoid the challenge of situating itself and examining its role in such a global economic and political framework. To do any less would be to ignore the complex interconnections between First and Third World economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries. I do not question the descriptive and informative value of most Western feminist writings on women in the Third World. I also do not question the existence of excellent work that does not fall into the analytic traps with which I am concerned. In fact, I deal with an example of such work later on. In the context of an overwhelming silence about the experience of women in these countries, as well as the need to forge international links between women's political struggles, such work is both pathbreaking

and absolutely essential. However, I want to draw attention here both to the explanatory potential of particular analytic strategies employed by such writing and to their political effect in the context of the hegemony of Western scholarship. While feminist writing in the United States is still marginalized (except from the point of view of women of color addressing privileged white women), Western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship—that is, the production, publication, distribution, and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience. One such significant effect of the dominant “representations” of Western feminism is its conflation with imperialism in the eyes of particular Third World women.<sup>4</sup> Hence the urgent need to examine the political implications of our analytic strategies and principles.

My critique is directed at three basic analytic principles that are present in (Western) feminist discourse on women in the Third World. Since I focus primarily on the Zed Press Women in the Third World series, my comments on Western feminist discourse are circumscribed by my analysis of the texts in this series.<sup>5</sup> This is a way of focusing my critique. However, even though I am dealing with feminists who identify themselves as culturally or geographically from the West, what I say about these presuppositions or implicit principles holds for anyone who uses these methods, whether Third World women in the West or Third World women in the Third World writing on these issues and publishing in the West. Thus I am not making a culturalist argument about ethnocentrism; rather, I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses. As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, that is, the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse.

The first analytic presupposition I focus on is involved in the strategic location of the category “women” vis-à-vis the context of analysis. The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy that can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (The context of analysis can be anything from kinship structures and the organization of labor to media representations.) The second analytical presupposition is evident on the method-

ological level, in the uncritical way "proof" of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided. The third is a more specifically political presupposition underlying the methodologies and the analytic strategies, that is, the model of power and struggle they imply and suggest. I argue that as a result of the two modes—or, rather, frames—of analysis described above, a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an "average Third World woman." This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions.

The distinction between Western feminist representation of women in the Third World and Western feminist self-presentation is a distinction of the same order as that made by some Marxists between the "maintenance" function of the housewife and the real "productive" role of wage labor, or the characterization by developmentalists of the Third World as being engaged in the lesser production of "raw materials" in contrast to the "real" productive activity of the First World. These distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent. Men involved in wage labor, First World producers, and, I suggest, Western feminists who sometimes cast Third World women in terms of "ourselves undressed" (Rosaldo 1980), all construct themselves as the normative referent in such a binary analytic.

### *Women as a Category of Analysis; or, We Are All Sisters in Struggle*

The phrase "women as a category of analysis" refers to the crucial assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis. This is an assumption that characterizes much feminist discourse. The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the "sameness" of their op-

pression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between "women" as a discursively constructed group and "women" as material subjects of their own history. Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of women as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as an always already constituted group, one that has been labeled powerless, exploited, sexually harassed, and so on, by feminist scientific, economic, legal, and sociological discourses. (Notice that this is quite similar to sexist discourse labeling women as weak, emotional, having math anxiety, etc.) This focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as "powerless" in a particular context. It is, rather, on finding a variety of cases of powerless groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.

In this section I focus on six specific ways in which "women" as a category of analysis is used in Western feminist discourse on women in the Third World. Each of these examples illustrates the construction of "Third World women" as a homogeneous "powerless" group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems. I have chosen to deal with a variety of writers—from Fran Hosken, who writes primarily about female genital mutilation, to writers from the Women in International Development (WID) school, who write about the effect of development policies on Third World women for both Western and Third World audiences. The similarity of assumptions about Third World women in all these texts forms the basis of my discussion. This is not to equate all the texts that I analyze, nor is it to equalize their strengths and weaknesses. The authors I deal with write with varying degrees of care and complexity; however, the effect of their representation of Third World women is a coherent one. In these texts women are defined as victims of male violence (Fran Hosken); as universal dependents (Beverly Lindsay and Maria Cutrufelli); victims of the colonial process (Maria Cutrufelli); victims of the Arab familial system (Juliette Mincses); victims of the Islamic code (Patricia Jeffery); and, finally, victims of the economic development process (Beverly Lindsay and the [liberal] WID school). This mode of defining women primarily in terms of their object status (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems) is what characterizes this particular form of the use of "women" as a category of analysis. In the context of Western women writing/studying women in the Third World, such objectification (however benevolently motivated) needs to be both named

and challenged. As Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar argue quite eloquently, "Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional,' also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism. They need to be continually challenged" (1984, 7).<sup>6</sup>

#### WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF MALE VIOLENCE

Fran Hosken, in writing about the relationship between human rights and female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East, bases her whole discussion/condemnation of genital mutilation on one privileged premise: that the goal of this practice is to "mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of woman" (1981, 11). This, in turn, leads her to claim that woman's sexuality is controlled, as is her reproductive potential. According to Hosken, "male sexual politics" in Africa and around the world shares "the same political goal: to assure female dependence and subservience by any and all means" (14). Physical violence against women (rape, sexual assault, excision, infibulation, etc.) is thus carried out "with an astonishing consensus among men in the world" (14). Here, women are defined consistently as the victim of male control—as the "sexually oppressed."<sup>7</sup> Although it is true that the potential of male violence against women circumscribes and elucidates their social position to a certain extent, defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into "objects-who-defend-themselves," men into "subjects-who-perpetrate-violence," and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people. Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies in order both to understand it better and to organize effectively to change it.<sup>8</sup> Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis.

#### WOMEN AS UNIVERSAL DEPENDENTS

Beverly Lindsay's conclusion to the book *Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex, and Class* (1983) states that "dependency relationships, based upon race, sex, and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. These are the linkages among Third World Women." Here, as in other places, Lindsay implies that Third World women constitute an identifiable group purely on the basis of shared dependencies. If shared dependencies were all that was needed to bind Third

World women together as a group, they would always be seen as an apolitical group with no subject status. Instead, if anything, it is the common context of political struggle against class, race, gender, and imperialist hierarchies that may constitute Third World women as a strategic group at this historical juncture. Lindsay also states that linguistic and cultural differences exist between Vietnamese and black American women, but "both groups are victims of race, sex, and class" (306). Again, black and Vietnamese women are characterized by their victim status.

Similarly, examine statements such as "My analysis will start by stating that all African women are politically and economically dependent" (Cutrufelli 1983, 13); "Nevertheless, either overtly or covertly, prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work for African women" (Cutrufelli 1983, 33). All African women are dependent. Prostitution is the only work option for African women as a group. Both statements are illustrative of generalizations sprinkled liberally through Maria Cutrufelli's book *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression*. On the cover of the book, Cutrufelli is described as an Italian writer, sociologist, Marxist, and feminist. Today, is it possible to imagine writing a book entitled *Women of Europe: Roots of Oppression*? I am not objecting to the use of universal groupings for descriptive purposes. Women from the continent of Africa can be descriptively characterized as "women of Africa." It is when "women of Africa" becomes a homogeneous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness (or even strengths) that problems arise—we say too little and too much at the same time.

This is because descriptive gender differences are transformed into the division between men and women. Women are constituted as a group via dependency relationships vis-à-vis men, who are implicitly held responsible for these relationships. When "women of Africa" as a group (versus "men of Africa" as a group?) are seen as a group precisely because they are generally dependent and oppressed, the analysis of specific historical differences becomes impossible, because reality is always apparently structured by divisions—two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive groups, the victims and the oppressors. Here the sociological is substituted for the biological, in order, however, to create the same—a unity of women. Thus it is not the descriptive potential of gender difference but the privileged positioning and explanatory potential of gender difference as the origin of oppression that I question. In using "women of Africa" (as an already constituted group of oppressed peoples) as a category of analysis, Cutrufelli denies any historical specificity to the location

of women as subordinate, powerful, marginal, central, or otherwise, vis-à-vis particular social and power networks. Women are taken as a unified "powerless" group prior to the analysis in question. Thus it is merely a matter of specifying the context after the fact. "Women" are now placed in the context of the family or in the workplace or within religious networks, almost as if these systems existed outside the relations of women with other women, and women with men.

The problem with this analytic strategy is that it assumes men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations. Only if we subscribe to this assumption is it possible to undertake analysis that looks at the "effects" of kinship structures, colonialism, organization of labor, and so on, on "women," defined in advance as a group. The crucial point that is forgotten is that women are produced through these very relations as well as being implicated in forming these relations. As Michelle Rosaldo argues, "[W]oman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (or even less, a function of what, biologically, she is) but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions" (1980, 400). That women mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one—one that needs to be stated and analyzed contextually.

#### MARRIED WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF THE COLONIAL PROCESS

In Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of kinship structure as a system of the exchange of women, what is significant is that exchange itself is not constitutive of the subordination of women; women are not subordinate because of the fact of exchange but because of the modes of exchange instituted and the values attached to these modes. However, in discussing the marriage ritual of the Bemba, a Zambian matrilineal, matrilineal people, Cutrufelli in *Women of Africa* focuses on the fact of the marital exchange of women before and after Western colonization, rather than the value attached to this exchange in this particular context. This leads to her definition of Bemba women as a coherent group affected in a particular way by colonization. Here again, Bemba women are constituted rather unilaterally as victims of the effects of Western colonization.

Cutrufelli cites the marriage ritual of the Bemba as a multistage event "whereby a young man becomes incorporated into his wife's family group as

he takes up residence with them and gives his services in return for food and maintenance" (43). This ritual extends over many years, and the sexual relationship varies according to the degree of the girl's physical maturity. It is only after she undergoes an initiation ceremony at puberty that intercourse is sanctioned and the man acquires legal rights over her. This initiation ceremony is the more important act of the consecration of women's reproductive power, so that the abduction of an uninitiated girl is of no consequence, while heavy penalty is levied for the seduction of an initiated girl. Cutrufelli asserts that European colonization has changed the whole marriage system. Now the young man is entitled to take his wife away from her people in return for money. The implication is that Bemba women have now lost the protection of tribal laws. The problem here is that while it is possible to see how the structure of the traditional marriage contract (versus the postcolonial marriage contract) offered women a certain amount of control over their marital relations, only an analysis of the political significance of the actual practice that privileges an initiated girl over an uninitiated one, indicating a shift in female power relations as a result of this ceremony, can provide an accurate account of whether Bemba women were indeed protected by tribal laws at all times.

It is not possible, however, to talk about Bemba women as a homogeneous group within the traditional marriage structure. Bemba women before the initiation are constituted within a different set of social relations compared to Bemba women after the initiation. To treat them as a unified group characterized by the fact of their "exchange" between male kin is to deny the sociohistorical and cultural specificities of their existence and the differential value attached to their exchange before and after their initiation. It is to treat the initiation ceremony as a ritual with no political implications or effects. It is also to assume that in merely describing the structure of the marriage contract, the situation of women is exposed. Women as a group are positioned within a given structure, but no attempt is made to trace the effect of the marriage practice in constituting women within an obviously changing network of power relations. Thus women are assumed to be sexual-political subjects prior to entry into kinship structures.

#### WOMEN AND FAMILIAL SYSTEMS

Elizabeth Cowie (1978), in another context, points out the implications of this sort of analysis when she emphasizes the specifically political nature of



kinship structures that must be analyzed as ideological practices that designate men and women as father, husband, wife, mother, sister, and so on. Thus, Cowie suggests, women as women are not located within the family. Rather, it is in the family, as an effect of kinship structures, that women as women are constructed, defined within and by the group. Thus, for instance, when Juliette Minces (1980) cites the patriarchal family as the basis for "an almost identical vision of women" that Arab and Muslim societies have, she falls into this very trap (see esp. 23). Not only is it problematical to speak of a vision of women shared by Arab and Muslim societies (i.e., over twenty different countries) without addressing the particular historical, material, and ideological power structures that construct such images, but to speak of the patriarchal family or the tribal kinship structure as the origin of the socioeconomic status of women is to assume again that women are sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the family. So while, on the one hand, women attain value or status within the family, the assumption of a singular patriarchal kinship system (common to all Arab and Muslim societies) is what apparently structures women as an oppressed group in these societies! This singular, coherent kinship system presumably influences another separate and given entity, "women." Thus, all women, regardless of class and cultural differences, are affected by this system. Not only are all Arab and Muslim women seen to constitute a homogeneous oppressed group, but there is no discussion of the specific practices within the family that constitute women as mothers, wives, sisters, and so on. Arabs and Muslims, it appears, don't change at all. Their patriarchal family is carried over from the times of the prophet Muhammad. They exist, as it were, outside history.

#### WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES

A further example of the use of "women" as a category of analysis is found in cross-cultural analyses that subscribe to a certain economic reductionism in describing the relationship between the economy and factors such as politics and ideology. Here, in reducing the level of comparison to the economic relations between "developed and developing" countries, any specificity to the question of women is denied. Mina Modares (1981), in a careful analysis of women and Shiism in Iran, focuses on this very problem when she criticizes feminist writings that treat Islam as an ideology separate from and outside social relations and practices, rather than as a discourse that includes rules for economic, social, and power relations within society. Patricia Jeffery's (1979)

otherwise informative work on Pirsada women in purdah considers Islamic ideology a partial explanation for the status of women in that it provides a justification for purdah. Here, Islamic ideology is reduced to a set of ideas whose internalization by Pirsada women contributes to the stability of the system. However, the primary explanation for purdah is located in the control that Pirsada men have over economic resources and the personal security purdah gives to Pirsada women.

By taking a specific version of Islam as *the* Islam, Jeffery attributes a singularity and coherence to it. Modares notes: "Islamic Theology" then becomes imposed on a separate and given entity called 'women.' A further unification is reached: Women (meaning *all women*), regardless of their differing positions within societies, come to be affected or not affected by Islam. These conceptions provide the right ingredients for an unproblematic possibility of a cross-cultural study of women" (63).

Marnia Lazreg (1988) makes a similar argument when she addresses the reductionism inherent in scholarship on women in the Middle East and North Africa:

A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the cause of gender inequality just as it is made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory in an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa mirrors that of theologians' own interpretation of women in Islam. The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being. Because women are subsumed under religion presented in fundamental terms, they are inevitably seen as evolving in nonhistorical time. They virtually have no history. Any analysis of change is therefore foreclosed. (87)

While Jeffery's analysis does not quite succumb to this kind of unitary notion of religion (Islam), it does collapse all ideological specificities into economic relations and universalizes on the basis of this comparison.

#### WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The best examples of universalization on the basis of economic reductionism can be found in the liberal literature about women in international development. Proponents of this school seek to examine the effect of development on Third World women, sometimes from self-designated feminist perspectives. At the very least, there is an evident interest in and commitment

to improving the lives of women in "developing" countries. Scholars such as Irene Tinker and Michelle Bo Bramsen (1972), Ester Boserup (1970), and Perdita Huston (1979) have all written about the effect of development policies on women in the Third World.<sup>9</sup> All four women assume "development" is synonymous with "economic development" or "economic progress." As in the case of Minces's patriarchal family, Hosken's male sexual control, and Cutrufelli's Western colonization, development here becomes the all-time equalizer. Women are affected positively or negatively by economic development policies, and this is the basis for cross-cultural comparison.

For instance, Huston (1979) states that the purpose of her study is to describe the effect of the development process on the "family unit and its individual members" in Egypt, Kenya, Sudan, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, and Mexico. She states that the "problems" and "needs" expressed by rural and urban women in these countries all center around education and training, work and wages, access to health and other services, political participation, and legal rights (116). Huston relates all these "needs" to insensitive development policies that exclude women as a group or category. For her, the solution is simple: implement improved development policies that emphasize training for women field-workers; use women trainees and women rural development officers; encourage women's cooperatives; and so on (119-22). Here again, women are assumed to be a coherent group or category prior to their entry into "the development process." Huston assumes that all Third World women have similar problems and needs. Thus, they must have similar interests and goals. However, the interests of urban, middle-class, educated Egyptian housewives, to take only one instance, could surely not be seen as being the same as those of their uneducated, poor maids. Development policies do not affect both groups of women in the same way. Practices that characterize women's status and roles vary according to class. Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion, and other ideological institutions and frameworks. They are not "women"—a coherent group—solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy. Such reductive cross-cultural comparisons result in the colonization of the specifics of daily existence and the complexities of political interests that women of different social classes and cultures represent and mobilize.

It is revealing that for Huston, women in the Third World countries she writes about have "needs" and "problems" but few if any have "choices" or the freedom to act. This is an interesting representation of women in the Third

World, one that is significant in suggesting a latent self-presentation of Western women that bears looking at. She writes, "What surprised and moved me most as I listened to women in such very different cultural settings was the striking commonality—whether they were educated or illiterate, urban or rural—of their most basic values: the importance they assign to family, dignity, and service to others" (115). Would Huston consider such values unusual for women in the West?

What is problematical about this kind of use of "women" as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. What characterizes women as a group is their gender (sociologically, not necessarily biologically, defined) over and above everything else, indicating a monolithic notion of sexual difference. Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men) and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women.

What would an analysis that did not do this look like? Maria Mies's work illustrates the strength of Western feminist work on women in the Third World that does not fall into the traps discussed above. Mies's study (1982) of the lace-makers of Narsapur, India, attempts to analyze carefully a substantial household industry in which "housewives" produce lace doilies for consumption in the world market. Through a detailed analysis of the structure of the lace industry, production and reproduction relations, the sexual division of labor, profits and exploitation, and the overall consequences of defining women as "nonworking housewives" and their work as "leisure-time activity," Mies demonstrates the levels of exploitation in this industry and the impact of this production system on the work and living conditions of the women involved in it. In addition, she is able to analyze the "ideology of the housewife," the notion of a woman sitting in the house, as providing the necessary subjective and sociocultural elements for the creation and maintenance

nance of a production system that contributes to the increasing pauperization of women and keeps them totally atomized and disorganized as workers. Mies's analysis shows the effect of a certain historically and culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization, an organization constructed on the basis of the definition of the lace-makers as nonworking housewives at familial, local, regional, statewide, and international levels. The intricacies and the effects of particular power networks not only are emphasized but form the basis of Mies's analysis of how this particular group of women is situated at the center of a hegemonic, exploitative world market.

Mies's study is a good example of what careful, politically focused, local analyses can accomplish. It illustrates how the category of women is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another. There is no easy generalization in the direction of "women in India" or "women in the Third World"; nor is there a reduction of the political construction of the exploitation of the lace-makers to cultural explanations about the passivity or obedience that might characterize these women and their situation. Finally, this mode of local, political analysis, which generates theoretical categories from within the situation and context being analyzed, also suggests corresponding effective strategies for organizing against the exploitation faced by the lace-makers. Narsapur women are not mere victims of the production process, because they resist, challenge, and subvert the process at various junctures. Here is one instance of how Mies delineates the connections between the housewife ideology, the self-consciousness of the lace-makers, and their interrelationships as contributing to the latent resistances she perceives among the women:

The persistence of the housewife ideology, the self-perception of the lace-makers as petty commodity producers rather than as workers, is not only upheld by the structure of the industry as such but also by the deliberate propagation and reinforcement of reactionary patriarchal norms and institutions. Thus, most of the lace-makers voiced the same opinion about the rules of *purdah* and seclusion in their communities which were also propagated by the lace exporters. In particular; the Kapu women said that they had never gone out of their houses, that women of their community could not do any other work than housework and lace work etc., but in spite of the fact that most of them still subscribed fully to the patriarchal norms of the *gosha* women, there were also contradictory elements in their con-

sciousness. Thus, although they looked down with contempt upon women who were able to work outside the house — like the untouchable Mala and Madiga women or women of other lower castes — they could not ignore the fact that these women were earning more money precisely because they were not respectable housewives but workers. At one discussion, they even admitted that it would be better if they could also go out and do coolie work. And when they were asked whether they would be ready to come out of their houses and work — in one place in some sort of a factory — they said they would do that. This shows that the *purdah* and housewife ideology, although still fully internalized, already had some cracks, because it has been confronted with several contradictory realities. (157)

It is only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised. Mies's study goes a long way toward offering such analysis. While there are now an increasing number of Western feminist writings in this tradition,<sup>10</sup> there is also, unfortunately, a large block of writing that succumbs to the cultural reductionism discussed earlier.

#### Methodological Universalisms; or, Women's Oppression As a Global Phenomenon

Western feminist writings on women in the Third World subscribe to a variety of methodologies to demonstrate the universal cross-cultural operation of male dominance and female exploitation. I summarize and critique three such methods below, moving from the simplest to the most complex.

First, proof of universalism is provided through the use of an arithmetic method. The argument goes like this: the greater the number of women who wear the veil, the more universal is the sexual segregation and control of women (Deardon 1975, 4-5). Similarly, a large number of different, fragmented examples from a variety of countries also apparently add up to a universal fact. For instance, Muslim women in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Egypt all wear some sort of a veil. Hence, the argument goes, sexual control of women is a universal fact in those countries (Deardon 1975, 7, 10). Fran Hosken writes, "Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, *purdah* (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (1981, 15). By equating *purdah* with

rape, domestic violence, and forced prostitution, Hosken asserts that purdah's "sexual control" function is the primary explanation for its existence, whatever the context. Institutions of purdah are thus denied any cultural and historical specificity and contradictions, and potentially subversive aspects are totally ruled out.

In both these examples, the problem is not in asserting that the practice of wearing a veil is widespread. This assertion can be made on the basis of numbers. It is a descriptive generalization. However, it is the analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women that must be questioned. While there may be a physical similarity in the veils worn by women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the specific meaning attached to this practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context. In addition, the symbolic space occupied by the practice of purdah may be similar in certain contexts, but this does not automatically indicate that the practices themselves have identical significance in the social realm. For example, as is well known, Iranian middle-class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity with their veiled, working-class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, mandatory Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils. While in both these instances, similar reasons might be offered for the veil (opposition to the Shah and Western cultural colonization in the first case and the true Islamization of Iran in the second), the concrete meanings attached to Iranian women wearing the veil are clearly different in both historical contexts. In the first case, wearing the veil is both an oppositional and a revolutionary gesture on the part of Iranian middle-class women; in the second case, it is a coercive, institutional mandate (see Tabari 1980 for detailed discussion). It is on the basis of such context specific differentiated analysis that effective political strategies can be generated. To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual segregation not only is analytically reductive but also proves quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy.

Second, concepts such as reproduction, the sexual division of labor, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, and so on are often used without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts. Feminists use these concepts in providing explanations for women's subordination, apparently assuming their universal applicability. For instance, how is it possible to refer to "the" sexual division of labor when the content of this division

changes radically from one environment to the next and from one historical juncture to another? At its most abstract level, it is the fact of the differential assignation of tasks according to sex that is significant; however, this is quite different from the meaning or value that the content of this sexual division of labor assumes in different contexts. In most cases the assigning of tasks on the basis of sex has an ideological origin. There is no question that a claim such as "Women are concentrated in service-oriented occupations in a large number of countries around the world" is descriptively valid. Descriptively, then, perhaps the existence of a similar sexual division of labor (where women work in service occupations such as nursing, social work, etc., and men in other kinds of occupations) in a variety of different countries can be asserted. However, the concept of the "sexual division of labor" is more than just a descriptive category. It indicates the differential value placed on men's work versus women's work.

Often the mere existence of a sexual division of labor is taken to be proof of the oppression of women in various societies. This results from a confusion between and collapsing together of the descriptive and explanatory potential of the concept of the sexual division of labor. Superficially similar situations may have radically different, historically specific explanations and cannot be treated as identical. For instance, the rise of female-headed households in middle-class America might be construed as a sign of great independence and feminist progress, the assumption being that this increase has to do with women choosing to be single parents, with an increasing number of lesbian mothers, and so on. However, the recent increase in female-headed households in Latin America,<sup>31</sup> which might at first be seen as indicating that women are acquiring more decision-making power, is concentrated among the poorest strata, where life choices are the most constrained economically. A similar argument can be made for the rise of female-headed families among black and Chicana women in the United States. The positive correlation between this and the level of poverty among women of color and white working-class women in the United States has now even acquired a name: the feminization of poverty. Thus, while it is possible to state that there is a rise in female-headed households in the United States and in Latin America, this rise cannot be discussed as a universal indicator of women's independence, nor can it be discussed as a universal indicator of women's impoverishment. The meaning of and explanations for the rise obviously vary according to the sociohistorical context.

Similarly, the existence of a sexual division of labor in most contexts cannot be sufficient explanation for the universal subjugation of women in the workforce. That the sexual division of labor does indicate a devaluation of women's work must be shown through analysis of particular local contexts. In addition, devaluation of women must also be shown through careful analysis. In other words, the "sexual division of labor" and "women" are not commensurate analytical categories. Concepts such as the sexual division of labor can be useful only if they are generated through local, contextual analyses (see Eldhom, Harris, and Young 1977). If such concepts are assumed to be universally applicable, the resultant homogenization of class, race, religion, and daily material practices of women in the Third World can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions, interests, and struggles between and among women globally. Beyond sisterhood there are still racism, colonialism, and imperialism.

Finally, some writers confuse the use of gender as a superordinate category of analysis with the universalistic proof and instantiation of this category. In other words, empirical studies of gender differences are confused with the analytical organization of cross-cultural work. Beverly Brown's (1983) review of the book *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Strathern and McCormack 1980) best illustrates this point. Brown suggests that nature:culture and female:male are superordinate categories that organize and locate lesser categories (such as wild:domestic and biology:technology) within their logic. These categories are universal in the sense that they organize the universe of a system of representations. This relation is totally independent of the universal substantiation of any particular category. Brown's critique hinges on the fact that rather than clarify the generalizability of nature:culture :: female:male as superordinate organization categories, *Nature, Culture and Gender* construes the universality of this equation to lie at the level of empirical truth, which can be investigated through fieldwork. Thus, the usefulness of the nature:culture :: female:male paradigm as a universal mode of the organization of representation within any particular sociohistorical system is lost. Here, methodological universalism is assumed on the basis of the reduction of the nature:culture :: female:male analytic categories to a demand for empirical proof of its existence in different cultures. Discourses of representation are confused with material realities, and the distinction made earlier between "Woman" and "women" is lost. Feminist work that blurs this distinction (which is, interestingly enough, often present in certain Western feminists' self-representation)

eventually ends up constructing monolithic images of "Third World women" by ignoring the complex and mobile relationships between their historical materiality on the level of specific oppressions and political choices, on the one hand, and their general discursive representations, on the other.

To summarize: I have discussed three methodological moves identifiable in feminist (and other academic) cross-cultural work that seeks to uncover a universality in women's subordinate position in society. The next and final section pulls together the previous ones, attempting to outline the political effects of the analytical strategies in the context of Western feminist writing on women in the Third World. These arguments are not against generalization as much as they are for careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities. Nor do these arguments deny the necessity of forming strategic political identities and affinities. Thus, while Indian women of different religions, castes, and classes might forge a political unity on the basis of organizing against police brutality toward women (see Kishwar and Vanita 1984), any analysis of police brutality must be contextual. Strategic coalitions that construct oppositional political identities for themselves are based on generalization and provisional unities, but the analysis of these group identities cannot be based on universalistic, ahistorical categories.

### The Subject(s) of Power

This section returns to my earlier discussion of the inherently political nature of feminist scholarship and attempts to clarify my point about the possibility of detecting a colonialist move in the case of a hegemonic connection between the First and Third Worlds in scholarship. The nine texts in Zed Press's *Women in the Third World* series that I have discussed<sup>12</sup> focused on the following common areas in examining women's "status" within various societies: religion, family/kinship structures, the legal system, the sexual division of labor, education, and, finally, political resistance. A large number of Western feminist writings on women in the Third World focus on these themes. Of course the Zed texts have varying emphases. For instance, two of the studies, *We Shall Return: Women of Palestine* (Bendt and Downing 1982) and *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (Omvedt 1980), focus explicitly on female militancy and political involvement, while *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society* (Minces 1980) deals with Arab women's legal, religious, and familial status. In addition, each text evidences a variety of methodologies and de-

grees of care in making generalizations. Interestingly enough, however, almost all the texts assume "women" as a category of analysis in the manner designated above.

Clearly this is an analytical strategy that is neither limited to these Zed Press publications nor symptomatic of Zed Press publications in general. However, each of the texts in question assumes that "women" have a coherent group identity within the different cultures discussed, prior to their entry into social relations. Thus Gail Omvedt can talk about "Indian women" while referring to a particular group of women in the state of Maharashtra; Cutrufelli can discuss "women of Africa," and Minces can talk about "Arab women"—all as if these groups of women have some sort of obvious cultural coherence, distinct from men in these societies. The "status" or "position" of women is assumed to be self-evident because women as an already constituted group are placed within religious, economic, familial, and legal structures. However, this focus whereby women are seen as a coherent group across contexts, regardless of class or ethnicity, structures the world in ultimately binary, dichotomous terms, where women are always seen in opposition to men, patriarchy is always necessarily male dominance, and the religious, legal, economic, and familial systems are implicitly assumed to be constructed by men. Thus, both men and women are always apparently constituted whole populations, and relations of dominance and exploitation are also posited in terms of whole peoples—wholes coming into exploitative relations. It is only when men and women are seen as different categories or groups possessing different already constituted categories of experience, cognition, and interests as groups that such a simplistic dichotomy is possible.

What does this imply about the structure and functioning of power relations? The setting up of the commonality of Third World women's struggles across classes and cultures against a general notion of oppression (rooted primarily in the group in power—i.e., men) necessitates the assumption of what Michel Foucault (1980, 135–45) calls the "juridico-discursive" model of power, the principal features of which are "a negative relation" (limit and lack), an "insistence on the rule" (which forms a binary system), a "cycle of prohibition," the "logic of censorship," and a "uniformity" of the apparatus functioning at different levels. Feminist discourse on the Third World that assumes a homogeneous category—or group—called women necessarily operates through the setting up of originary power divisions. Power relations are structured in terms of a unilateral and undifferentiated source of power and a

cumulative reaction to power. Opposition is a generalized phenomenon created as a response to power—which, in turn, is possessed by certain groups of people.

The major problem with such a definition of power is that it locks all revolutionary struggles into binary structures—possessing power versus being powerless. Women are powerless, unified groups. If the struggle for a just society is seen in terms of the move from powerlessness to power for women as a group, and this is the implication in feminist discourse that structures sexual difference in terms of the division between the sexes, then the new society would be structurally identical to the existing organization of power relations, constituting itself as a simple inversion of what exists. If relations of domination and exploitation are defined in terms of binary divisions—groups that dominate and groups that are dominated—then surely the implication is that the accession to power of women as a group is sufficient to dismantle the existing organization of relations. But women as a group are not in some sense essentially superior or infallible. The crux of the problem lies in that initial assumption of women as a homogeneous group or category ("the oppressed"), a familiar assumption in Western radical and liberal feminisms.<sup>13</sup>

What happens when this assumption of "women as an oppressed group" is situated in the context of Western feminist writing about Third World women? It is here that I locate the colonialist move. By contrasting the representation of women in the Third World with what I referred to earlier as Western feminisms' self-presentation in the same context, we see how Western feminists alone become the true "subjects" of this counterhistory. Third World women, in contrast, never rise above the debilitating generality of their "object" status.

While radical and liberal feminist assumptions of women as a sex class might elucidate (however inadequately) the autonomy of particular women's struggles in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency. Similarly, many Zed Press authors who ground themselves in the basic analytic strategies of traditional Marxism also implicitly create a "unity" of women by substituting "women's activity" for "labor" as the primary theoretical determinant of women's situation. Here



again, women are constituted as a coherent group not on the basis of "natural" qualities or needs but on the basis of the sociological "unity" of their role in domestic production and wage labor (see Haraway 1985, esp. 76). In other words, Western feminist discourse, by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group that is placed in kinship, legal, and other structures, defines Third World women as subjects outside social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted through these very structures.

Legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards. It is here that ethnocentric universality comes into play. When these structures are defined as "underdeveloped" or "developing" and women are placed within them, an implicit image of the "average Third World woman" is produced. This is the transformation of the (implicitly Western) "oppressed woman" into the "oppressed Third World woman." While the category of "oppressed woman" is generated through an exclusive focus on gender difference, "the oppressed Third World woman" category has an additional attribute—the "Third World difference." The Third World difference includes a paternalistic attitude toward women in the Third World.<sup>14</sup> Since discussions of the various themes I identified earlier (kinship, education, religion, etc.) are conducted in the context of the relative "underdevelopment" of the Third World (a move that constitutes nothing less than unjustifiably confusing development with the separate path taken by the West in its development, as well as ignoring the directionality of the power relationship between the First and Third Worlds), Third World women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as religious (read: not progressive), family-oriented (read: traditional), legally unsophisticated (read: they are still not conscious of their rights), illiterate (read: ignorant), domestic (read: backward), and sometimes revolutionary (read: their country is in a state of war; they must fight!). This is how the "Third World difference" is produced.

When the category of "sexually oppressed women" is located within particular systems in the Third World that are defined on a scale that is normed through Eurocentric assumptions, not only are Third World women defined in a particular way prior to their entry into social relations, but, since no connections are made between First and Third World power shifts, the assumption is reinforced that the Third World just has not evolved to the extent that the West has. This mode of feminist analysis, by homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women in these countries, erases all mar-

ginal and resistant modes and experiences.<sup>15</sup> It is significant that none of the texts I reviewed in the Zed Press series focuses on lesbian politics or the politics of ethnic and religious marginal organizations in Third World women's groups. Resistance can thus be defined only as cumulatively reactive, not as something inherent in the operation of power. If power, as Michel Foucault has argued, can be understood only in the context of resistance,<sup>16</sup> this misconceptualization is both analytically and strategically problematical. It limits theoretical analysis as well as reinforces Western cultural imperialism. For in the context of a First/Third World balance of power, feminist analyses that perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the Third World woman, images such as the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, and so on. These images exist in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse that exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing First/Third World connections.

To conclude, let me suggest some disconcerting similarities between the typically authorizing signature of such Western feminist writings on women in the Third World and the authorizing signature of the project of humanism in general—humanism as a Western ideological and political project that involves the necessary recuperation of the "East" and "Woman" as others. Many contemporary thinkers, including Michel Foucault (1978, 1980), Jacques Derrida (1974), Julia Kristeva (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1977), and Edward Said (1978), have written at length about the underlying anthropomorphism and ethnocentrism that constitute a hegemonic humanistic problematic that repeatedly confirms and legitimates (Western) man's centrality. Feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray (1981), Sarah Kofman (see Berg 1982), and Helene Cixous (1981) have also written about the recuperation and absence of woman/women within Western humanism. The focus of the work of all these thinkers can be stated simply as an uncovering of the political interests that underlie the binary logic of humanistic discourse and ideology, whereby, as a valuable essay puts it, "the first (majority) term (Identity, Universality, Culture, Disinterestedness, Truth, Sanity, Justice, etc.), which is, in fact, secondary and derivative (a construction), is privileged over and colonizes the second (minority) term (difference, temporality, anarchy, error, interest-ness, insanity, deviance, etc.), which is, in fact, primary and originaive" (Spanos 1984). In other words, it is only insofar as "woman/women" and "the East" are defined as others, or as peripheral, that (Western) man/humanism



can represent him/itself as the center. It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the center. Just as feminists such as Kristeva and Cixous deconstruct the latent anthropomorphism in Western discourse, I have suggested a parallel strategy in this in uncovering a latent ethnocentrism in particular feminist writings on women in the Third World.<sup>17</sup>

As discussed earlier, a comparison between Western feminist self-presentation and Western feminist representation of women in the Third World yields significant results. Universal images of the Third World woman (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the "Third World difference" to "sexual difference," are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that Western women are secular, liberated, and in control of their own lives. I am referring to a discursive self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality. If this were material reality, there would be no need for political movements in the West. Similarly, only from the vantage point of the West is it possible to define the Third World as underdeveloped and economically dependent. Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the Third World, there would be no (singular and privileged) First World. Without the "Third World woman," the particular self-presentation of Western women mentioned above would be problematical. I am suggesting, then, that the one enables and sustains the other. This is not to say that the signature of Western feminist writings on the Third World has the same authority as the project of Western humanism. However, in the context of the hegemony of the Western scholarly establishment in the production and dissemination of texts, and in the context of the legitimating imperative of humanistic and scientific discourse, the definition of "the Third World woman" as a monolith might well tie into the largereconomic and ideological praxis of "disinterested" scientific inquiry and pluralism that are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the "non-Western" world. It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*

The US and the USSR are the most powerful countries in the world but only 1/8 of the world's population. African people are also 1/8 of the world's population. of that, 1/4 is Nigerian. 1/2 of the world's population is Asian. 1/2 of that is Chinese. There are 22 nations in the middle east. Most people in the world are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female, Non-Christian and do not speak English. By the year 2000 the 20 largest cities in the world will have one thing in common none of them will be in Europe none in the United States.  
—Audre Lorde, January 1, 1989

I begin this essay with Audre Lorde's words as a tribute to her courage in consistently engaging the very institutional power structures that define and circumscribe the lives of Third World women.<sup>1</sup> The poem also has deep personal significance for me: Lorde read it as part of her commencement remarks at Oberlin College, where I used to teach, in May 1989. Her words provide a poetic cartography of the historical and political location of Third World peoples and document the urgency of our predicament in a Eurocentric world. Lorde's language suggests with a precise force and poignancy the contours of the world we occupy now: a world that is definable only in relational terms, a world traversed with intersecting lines of power and resistance, a world that